

Sydney's Mount Druitt: A microcosm of Australia's social crisis

A WSWs reporting team
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Following the federal budget on May 12, a *World Socialist Web Site* reporting team carried out an investigation into the deepening social catastrophe in Mount Druitt, a working-class area in Sydney's outer west, and the implications of a raft of funding cuts initiated last year to already under-resourced community organisations.

The Abbott government's budget continued the decades-long, bipartisan assault on the welfare state that has intensified since the 2008 global economic crisis. The budget measures will exacerbate the distress already rampant in communities like Mount Druitt. These include the abolition of family tax benefits for low-income families and a punitive crackdown on welfare recipients, including barring young people between 18–25 from receiving Newstart unemployment or Youth Allowance payments for one month.

Mount Druitt embodies the disastrous impact of these regressive policies. Decades of job cuts have led to growing levels of unemployment and underemployment. Successive governments have done nothing to improve public transport, preventing many residents from looking for work elsewhere. Public housing stocks are being sold off, creating an escalating housing crisis and homelessness. Hospitals, health services and schools are chronically under-funded. Widespread poverty inevitably compounds myriad social problems—drug addiction, petty crime, family tensions and breakdown, mental health issues—to name a few.

The deteriorating conditions in working-class suburbs like Mount Druitt are for the most part avoided in the establishment media. Following this month's budget, a handful of discussions, commentaries and programs appeared. For the most part, they either painted workers and youth in Mount Druitt and other areas as passive victims, or worse, like the recent Special Broadcasting Service program *Struggle Street*, implicitly promoted the view that they were to blame for the desperate situation they confront. All of this was to deliberately obscure where the real responsibility lies: with successive governments, Labor and Coalition, and the profit system itself.

In an episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's Q&A program on May 11, residents of Mount Druitt and representatives of some local organisations were given a window of opportunity to speak. They pointed to worsening

social conditions and denounced the Abbott government's \$240 million in funding cutbacks to essential community programs.

Margaret Bell, of Mount Druitt Learning Ground, whose funding has been cut entirely, commented: "I've worked for 12 years in Mount Druitt with people who are extremely disadvantaged. I think that all low socio-economic environments need education and jobs and both sides of parliament are always banging on about jobs and getting kids back to school." She challenged the panel to explain why, under these conditions, funding to community organisations was being slashed.

Abbott's parliamentary secretary Christian Porter simply evaded the question, claiming that Australia's welfare system entails "the greatest redistribution of wealth from taxpayers to tax receivers of any country in the world." In fact, the opposite is the case. While welfare recipients struggle to survive on poverty level benefits—just \$39 a day for the unemployed and \$30 a day for young jobless workers, the wealthy take an ever-increasing share of income nationally.

Jason Clare, a Labor MP from western Sydney, postured as an opponent of the cuts, to obscure the fact that the previous Labor government, in which he was a minister, laid the basis for the Abbott government's austerity measures, including by cutting benefits for sole parents.

As part of its investigation, the WSWs interviewed Bell, and representatives of other organisations that work with young people, the unemployed and Aboriginal people, as well as health workers and youth in Mount Druitt.

The cumulative picture that emerges is one of deepening social distress and misery, resulting from the gutting of essential services and jobs, with a relative handful of organisations seeking to address problems that are far beyond their shrinking means to overcome.

Located some 43 kilometres from central Sydney, Mount Druitt was for many decades at the city's outermost reaches. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the area and surrounding suburbs were the focus of extensive public housing development. Large numbers of low-income workers and retirees, unable to afford a home on the private rental market, moved into the area.

Like working class areas throughout the country, the decimation of jobs over the past two decades has resulted in widespread unemployment. Official figures, which grossly understate the depth of the problem, indicated 11.6 percent unemployment in Mount Druitt last year. For young people, unemployment is at depression-era levels.

For the broad area around Blacktown, which includes Mount Druitt, youth unemployment, officially, was 16.9 percent in mid-2014. However, earlier figures from the 2011 census revealed pockets of joblessness in suburbs around Mount Druitt that were far higher. In Bidwill, Blackett, and Whalan, it was about 30 percent, in Emerton 36 percent, while in Tregear and Lethbridge Park, it was over 40 percent.

Unemployment and poverty have created huge social problems among young people. Everyone who spoke to the WSWs noted the marked growth in mental health issues, homelessness and drug addiction. A health worker said the situation dramatically worsened around 2010, following the onset of the global financial crisis.

The health worker explained: “We are not just dealing with some health issues and a bit of depression. Young people are getting sicker. They are homeless, have physical issues, mental illnesses, drug and alcohol issues. We never used to see homeless kids.” She said these young people needed everything from a shower, food, blankets to washing machines and dryers, so they could wash their clothes.

The health worker said young people with mental health issues often have no means of seeking assistance. “They can’t get treatment or help unless they have been diagnosed, but getting diagnosed is another question itself,” she commented. “They have to go to emergency [at a hospital] and at times we have to go with them and wait for hours. Then they have to see a private psychologist and they can be very expensive.”

The terrible social conditions are also expressed in growing drug abuse, particularly involving the potent and destructive methamphetamine—ice. The only response of governments has been to intensify a police crackdown, especially on youth, as budget austerity measures compound the distress that drive some to turn to drugs. Between 2010 and 2014, the number of people charged with use or possession of amphetamines, including ice, in Mount Druitt and the neighbouring suburb of St Mary’s spiked by 283 percent.

Health facilities in the area, which have been run-down by decades of funding cuts, are grossly inadequate. One community worker noted that patients with serious health problems are often first taken to Mount Druitt hospital’s emergency wing, and then sent on to Blacktown Hospital because of the lack of resources.

In 2012, Blacktown and Mount Druitt hospitals were both ranked among the 10 “worst performing” emergency departments in Australia. At Blacktown Hospital, 10 percent of patients waited over 27 hours before leaving the emergency department.

The WSWs spoke to Jessica, a 21-year-old homeless woman, forced to “couch-surf,” or move from one friend’s house to another, following a mental breakdown earlier this year. She pointed out that in order to be eligible for public housing, she had to apply for four houses every four days on the private rental market—despite being unable to afford any housing in the area.

“I didn’t get any support,” Jessica said. “You only get support if you are together enough to get all the paperwork in, then you can get help. Couch surfing is simpler than trying to go through [the] housing [department].”

The problems are getting worse. The homelessness and overcrowding is intensifying as the sell-off of public housing escalates. Jon Owen, a community worker with Urban Neighbours of Hope, estimated that around 10–15 percent of public housing in the Mount Druitt suburb of Bidwill, had been sold off since 2007. He found that families were frequently forced to live in small dwellings, with as many as eight or nine people. In one case, over 20 people were living in the one dwelling.

Mount Druitt is also home to Australia’s largest urban Aboriginal population, and a hub for those moving to Sydney from remote and regional areas. Yet funding for the Aboriginal Medical Service Western Sydney, which treats thousands of Aboriginal patients, has been virtually stagnant for over 20 years.

Jennifer Beale, from the Butucarbin Aboriginal Corporation, said that amid a growing housing shortage and mounting social problems, the authorities were placing Aboriginal children in out-of-home care in record numbers. She likened the 400 percent increase in Aboriginal children being removed from their families, to the “stolen generation” policy pursued by the Australian political establishment in previous decades.

The social disaster in Mount Druitt is a product of the policies pursued by successive governments, at all levels, Labor and Liberal alike. Under conditions of a deepening economic breakdown, all the establishment parties are committed to an escalation of austerity measures and attacks on the social position of the working class.

Jon Owen noted in his interview with the WSWs: “We’re being primed for more cuts, less support and more demoralisation of the working class and the underclass.”

Over the coming days, the WSWs will publish the interviews it conducted with community workers and others in Mount Druitt.



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